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ABSTRACT

The context of Kohlberg-prompted interest in moral development stage models is described. Some of Piaget's scattered comments about the use of stage models in studying and understanding moral development are presented and their implications exposed. While admitting the necessity and utility of such heuristic models, Piaget frequently urges caution regarding their ambiguity, arbitrariness, complexity, and limitations. These cautions about the use of stage development models in the investigation and in the evaluation of moral growth are recalled for the benefit of human service personnel who are enthusiastic about such models. (Author)

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MORAL DEVELOPMENT STAGE MODELS -- USES AND ABUSES: PIAGET'S ADVICE TO HUMAN SERVICE PERSONNEL

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Many educators, long desirous of a comprehensive and comprehensible theory of moral development and of a promising practice ('method') of moral education, have welcomed with considerable enthusiasm Lawrence Kohlberg's contributions: a theoretical model which includes developmental stages of a person's moral evolution, and a method of using moral dilemma anecdotes to discern persons' developmental status and to stimulate their further development. Increasing interest in Kohlberg's work has prompted a number of recent comments and critical appraisals.[1] This paper purports to contribute to the on-going discussion.

Kohlberg's work is viewed as inspired by, and, in some sense, derived from the earlier work of Jean Piaget. A key element in Kohlberg's theory and practice is a heuristic device, "developmental stages." What Piaget has to say about stages of moral development should interest both Kohlberg enthusiasts and Kohlberg critics, as well as Piaget's fans and other students of human development.[2]

The very notion of a "stage of development" is called into question by many authorities. John Wilson, distinguished Oxford philosopher and longtime director of the Farmington Trust Moral Education Project, in a speech last year at the Philosophy of Education Society's annual meeting, remarked that "stages of development" is an idea which he has "for some years tried, but always failed, to understand."[3] Jerome Bruner, asking whether "it is more fruitful to postulate "stages"of growth or to think in terms of gradual processes of growth," replies that he believes "the issue is a fruitless one, and for several reasons. For one thing," he argues, " the smoothness of the growth curve is very much a function of the kind of behavior one is looking

at--and, in some instances, of how carefully one looks." Bruner uses language development studies as an example and shows how investigations which involve identification of successive grammars lead to a situation in which "each grammar one writes, particularly if there are marked differences in rules, represents a 'atate' or 'stage' in language development." He insists that it is "perfectly legitimate and necessary to recognize .... discontinuities, even though they may disappear if one seeks to average a population of children rather than studying one at a time." He argues that "for A particular child, however, considered in the light of his capacity to solve A particular type of problem, there appear to be important discontinuities (though) the change might appear quite gradual."[4] When Barbel Inhelder, longtime associate of Piaget, was asked "if she envisages these steps in mental development as definite steps with a pause in between, or does she envisage the mental development as continuous and these steps simply as milestones of measurement," responded that "the evolution appears to be continuous; however, in this continuous process there seem to be decisive periods, e.g., at about seven years, which appear as accelerations. It all happens as if a slow preparation suddenly culminated in an achievement."[5]

Piaget is never unmindful of the difficulties of the 'stage' model. When Alfred McBride accuses Jim Fowler (in his theory of developmental stages of faith-knowing) of presenting a model that "masks a logical construct imposed on people, and not a revelation of the inherent order which is the object of the

research," he contrasts Fowler's approach with Piaget's, arguing that "Piaget did not impose 'logical' development on children."[6] Piaget continues to speak of periods, eras, or 'stages' which are invariant, sequential, cumulative, and each characterized by the smooth performance of behavior(s) which hitherto were beyond the scope of the person's capabilities. Phillips and Kelly have suggested that the 'invariance' element in Piaget's model is "a mixture of the necessary and the empirical," that is, is only partly empirically and partly conceptually grounded,[7] but I do not find their argument convincing. The danger they allude to, that of presenting a heuristic device as a description of empirical fact, is one of which Piaget himself has often warned us.

Early in his classic investigations of the evolution of The Moral Judgement of the Child[8], Piaget, after proposing that observational data regarding evolution in the practice of game-rules suggest four successive developmental stages, says:

> These stages must of course be taken for what they are worth. It is convenient for the purpose of exposition to divide the children up in age-classes or stages, but the facts present themselves as a continuum which cannot be cut up into sections. This continuum, moreover, is not linear in character, and its general direction can only be observed by schematizing the material and ignoring the minor oscillations which render it infinitely complicated in detail. (27-28)

Here Piaget is careful to remind his readers that his heuristic model of discrete developmental stages simplifies and schematizes what in reality is a complicated continuum--and a 'non-linear' continuum at that![9]

Reporting the results of his next investigation, into the evolution of the consciousness of rules, Piaget explains that "we shall find a progression that is even more elusive in detail, but no less clearly marked if taken on a big scale"(28). With a large enough sample population, he argues, one will discover three successive stages in the evolution of rule-consciousness--stages which correlate with the above-mentioned four stages of rule-practice. He then indicates that this correlation is "of course only a statistical correlation and therefore very crude," though,"broadly speaking, ... indisputable"(28).

In the concluding section of his report on the study of game-rules, Piaget points out that, between the various types of rules ('motor," 'coercive,' and 'rational') there is "at once continuity and qualitative difference! continuity of function and difference of structure," which, he argues, "renders arbitrary any attempt to cut mental reality up into stages."(85)

In Piaget's own theory, beyond premoral motor behavior, there are only two stages in moral evolution: the (egocentric) heteronomous stage of the immature person, characterized by unilateral respect, and the reciprocal autonomy of the mature person, characterized by mutual respect achieved through collaborative experiences. When he is asked to delineate the difference between these stages, he confesses:

> Rules evolve as the child grows older; neither the practice nor the consciousness of rules is the same at six as it is at twelve. Is the difference one of nature or of degree? After having done our utmost to show that child thought differs from adult thought not only in degree but in its very nature, we confess that we no longer know precisely what is meant by these terms. .... Psychologically, as M. Bergson has well shown, every difference of degree or quantity is also a difference of quality. Conversely, it is difficult to think of a difference in kind without the prdsence of at least some functional continuity, so that between two successive structures a succession of intermediate degrees could be found. For instance, after having tried to describe the child's mentality as distinct from the adult's we have found ourselves obliged to include it in our descriptions of the adult mind in so far as the adult still remains a child. This happens particularly in the case of moral psychology, since certain features of child morality always appear to be closely connected with a situation that from the first predominates in childhood (egocentrism, resulting from the inequality between the child and the adult surrounding which presses upon him) but which may recur in adult life, especially in the strict conformist and gerontocratic societies designated as primitive. Conversely, in certain circumstances where he experiments with new types of conduct by cooperating with his equals, the child is already an adult. There is an adult in every child and a child in every adult.(84-85)

Urging that even his two stages not be viewed as completely distinct or discrete, he concludes that

> The difference in nature reduces itself to this. There exist in the child certain attitudes and beliefs which intellectual development will more and more tend to eliminate: there are others which will acquire more and more importance. The latter are not simply derived from the

> former but are partly antagonistic to them. The two sets of phenomena are to be met both in the child and in the adult, but one set predominates in the one, the other in the other. It is, we may say, simply a question of the proportions in which they are mixed; so long as we remember that every difference of proportion is also a difference of general quality, for the spirit is one and undivided (85).

Such a conception of stage differences compounds the difficulty of classifying individual persons. One must be sure that the observed data (behavioral or verbal) represent the predominant element in the proportion.

(In a later section of his report, while suggesting that it is "possible to distinguish three broad stages in the development of distributive justice in relation to adult authority," since "a law of evolution emerges sufficiently clearly" from all the children's responses, Piaget cautions:

> True, we cannot speak of stages properly so called, because it is extremely doubtful whether every child passes successively through the four attitudes we have just described. It is greatly a question of the kind of education the child has received(284).)

Discussing further the differences between the types of rules which the person accepts as normative, Piaget calls attention to another factor.

He had already mentioned that, between the various types of rules there will be both continuity and qualitative difference.

> The matter is further complicated by the "Law of conscious realization" and the resulting time-lag. The appearance of a new type of rule on the practical plane does not necessarily mean that this rule will come into the subject's consciousness, for each mental operation has to be relearnt on the different planes of action and of thought. There are therefore no inclusive stages which define the whole of a subject's mental life at a given point of his evolution; the stages should be thought of as the successive phases of regular processes recurring like a rhythm

> on the superposed planes of behavior and of consciousness. A given individual may, for example, have reached the stage of autonomy with regard to a certain group of rules, while his consciousness of these rules, together with the practice of certain more subtle rules, will still be colored with heteronomy. We cannot therefore speak of global or inclusive stages characterized as such by autonomy or heteronomy, but only of phases of heteronomy or autonomy which define a process that is repeated for each new set of rules or for each new plane of thought or of reflection (85-86).

Piaget cites, as an example of these phenomena, the child of 10 who will "show signs of autonomy in his application of the rules of the game of marbles, but will give proof of heteronomy in the extent to which he is conscious of these rules and in his application of rules relating to lying and justice(86)." This clear distinction between the practice of a given set of rules and the consciousness of the same set of rules suggests the necessity, when proposing or utilizing a stage-model, of carefully distinguishing between stages of practice and stages of consciousness of the same norms.

Recalling the correlation between three types of behavior (motor, egocentric, and cooperative) and three types of rules, Piaget once again cautions that "things are motor, individual, and social all at once. .... Here again, it is not so much a question of these successive features themselves as of the proportions in which they are present." (87). He warns against "arranging these phenomena in a strict sequence, as though they made a single appearance and then disappeared from the scene once and for all(86)."

In a very different context, defending the more refined model of cognitive development, Piaget argues that the stages and substages "always succeed one another in the same order" and that this "is clear enough proff of the 'natural' and spontaneous character of their sequential development." But, he adds, "they do not on the other hand correspond to absolute ages; on the contrary, accelerations or delats are observed according to the differences of social enviroment and acquired experience .... up to as much as four years."[10] In tha same work he lists four cautions regarding the stage model:

> The characteristic ages one can achieve, even when the procedure includes a large number of children, are never more than averages; so that their succession, although real in an overall sense, does not exclude either telescoping or even momentary individual regressions.
>
> Secondly, there are all sorts of overlaps when one passes from one particular test to another: a child that belongs in one particular stage as far as one particular question of causality is concerned may very well have moved on to the next stage with regard to some neighboring causal question. .... A particular form of behavior or a recently acquired notion does not become general right away, and each problem entails its own particular difficulties. These overlaps in extension, if such a phrase may be employed, probably exclude the possibility of establishing generally applicable stage limits, except during the first two or three years of existence.
>
> In the third place, there are also overlaps in comprehension: the same notion may appear on the sensorimotor, or practical level long before becoming the object of a conscious elucidation or of reflection. .... This lack of synchronism between the different levels of action and thought complicates our picture of the developmental stages even further.
>
> Finally, and above all (for it would be impossible to emphasize this point too strongly), each stage of development is characterized much less by a fixed thought content than by a certain power, a certain potential activity, capable of achieving such and such a result according to the environment in which the child lives. .... The child's thought (though no more so than that of the adult), cannot ever be captured in itself and independently of the environment. The child at a given stage will produce different work and give variable responses to analogous questions according to his family or school environment, according to

> who is questioning him, etc. Thus we can never obtain anything more from experiments than sorts of mental phenotypes and it will always remain bad practice to look upon such or such a reaction as an absolute characteristic, such as the permanent content of a given stage.[11]

At every opportunity Piaget reveals his constant concern to remind us of the arbitrariness, ambiguities, complexities, and limitations as well as the necessity and utility of heuristic models and classification schemes, including his own developmental stage model.

There are, moreover, two axioms of measurement interpretation which must be heeded by moral evaluators. The first is concerned with the adequacy of the classification instrument. Techniques which are adequate for the rough classification (e.g., into three 'groups': good--better--best) of large populations are not necessarily adequate or refined enough for the accurate classification of any individual within the large population. Macro-classification tools are often too clumsy for precise micro-classification. When the classification instrument is the interrogatory, it is subject to all of the limitations already mentioned. The second measurement axiom is even more important for moral evaluators: a 'higher' score indicates the presence of a high amount or degree of the information or skill which the evaluation device actually measures (which may or may not be what the device's authors claim it measures), but a 'low' score, of itself, does not indicate anything, there being countless reasons why a subject may have a low score, most of them being unrelated to the focus of evaluation. This second axiom raises serious questions about the justice of classifying individual children as belonging to 'lower' stages of development on the basis of single interviews.

If the preceding discussion has the effect of making some stage-model enthusiasts more hesitant to evaluate young persons' moral development, so be it! There are few scenes in education more pathetic (and often more dangerous) than the well-meaning activities of the method-enthusiast who comprehends neither the rationale for nor the limitations of the favored method. Nowhere, to my knowledge, does Piaget urge educators to use his protocols for the classification (in the diagnosis/prescription sense) of their individual students. Piaget is most insistent that an understanding

of the process of human development is both necessary and helpful for all who would promote that development. Consciousness that any group of growing persons may contain representatives of a wide spectrum of points on the developmental continuum compels the concerned educator to provide contexts and activities which will challenge them all: a wide variety of opportunities to engage in 'spontaneous' (freely chosen) collaborative projects through action and experiment on real objects and real social situations. For Piaget, this is the appropriate environment for the promotion of cognitive and moral development, an environment which must include a wide variety of differing opinions and evaluations. An understanding of human development is important for educators, not because they are able or expected to orchestrate development directly, but to enable them to be intelligent and sympathetic providers of a growth-fostering environment. For Piaget, moral development is the by-product of cooperative experiences which foster mutual respect. The educator can create neither the respect nor the development, but the educator has a crucial role in creating an environment rich in the variety of stimulating challenges to undertake collaborative projects. As Piaget put it:

> From the point of view of schooling, this means, in the first place, that we must recognize the existence of a process of mental development; that all intellectual raw material is not invariably assimilable at all ages; that we should take into account the particular interests and needs of each stage. It also means, in the second place, that environment can play a decisive role in the development of the mind; that the thought contents of the stages and the ages at which they occur are not immutably fixed; that sound methods can therefore increase the students' efficiency and even accelerate their spiritual growth without making it any the less sound. [12]

[1]Cf., e.g., Jane Loevinger, "Issues in the Measurement of Moral Development," in MORAL DEVELOPMENT: PROCEEDINGS OF THE 1974 ETS INVITATIONAL CONFERENCE (Princeton: Educational Testing Service, 1974), Pp. 57-68; Ronald Duska & Mariellen Whelan, MORAL DEVELOPMENT: A GUIDE TO PIAGET AND KOHLBERG (New York: Paulist Press, 1975), Pp. 42-79; Robert Hall & John Davis, MORAL EDUCATION IN THEORY AND PRACTICE (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1975), Pp. 89-126; Thomas Hennessy (ed.), VALUES AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), Pp. 102-123; Betty Sichel, "Can Kohlberg Respond to Critics?," EDUCATIONAL THEORY 26(#4; Fall 1976), 337-347, 394; Betty Sichel, "A Critical Study of Kohlberg's Theory of the Development of Moral Judgements," in PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION 1976: PROCEEDINGS OF THE 32ND ANNUAL MEETING OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION SOCIETY (Urbana: Philosophy of Education Society, 1976), Pp. 209-220; John Gibbs, "Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Judgement: A Constructive Critique," HARVARD EDUCATIONAL REVIEW 47(#1; February, 1977), 43-61; Israela Aron, "Moral Philosophy and Moral Education: A Critique of Kohlberg's Theory," SCHOOL REVIEW 85(#2: February, 1977), 197-217; Cornel Hamm, "The Content of Moral Education, or In Defense of the "Bag of Virtues"," SCHOOL REVIEW 85(#2, February 1977), 218-228. The most recent contribution to the discussion will be found in R. Landrum et al. , Stage Theories of Cognitive and Moral Development: Criticisms and Application.(Cambridge: Harvard Educational Review Reprint #13, 1978.

[2]Cf. Kohlberg's own remarks about the uses and abuses of his test: Lawrence Kohlberg, "The Development of Moral Stages: Uses and Abuses," in MEASUREMENT FOR SELF-UNDERSTANDING AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT: PROCEEDINGS OF THE 1973 INVITATIONAL CONFERENCE ON TESTING PROBLEMS (Princeton: Educational Testing Service, 1974), Pp. 1-8. A more recent caution may be found in the section, "How Not to Apply the Moral Stages"(p.39) in Thomas Lickona, "How To Encourage Moral Development," LEARNING (March, 1977), 36-43.

[3]Wilson, John. "First Steps in Education, Morality, and Religion," in Ira S. Steinberg (ed.), Philosophy of Education 1977: Proceedings of the Thirty-Third Annual Meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society. (Urbana: Educational Theory, 1977, pp. 29-48). Pgss 43-44.

[4]Jerome Bruner, "On Cognitive Growth," in J. Bruner, R. Oliver, & P. Greenfield (eds.), Studies in Cognitive Growth: A Collaboration of the Center for Cognitive Studies (New York: Wiley, 1966, pp. 1-29). Pg. 5.

[5]J.M.Tanner & Barbel Inhelder (eds.), Discussions on Child Development: a Consideration of the Biological, Psychological, and Cultural Approaches to the Understanding of Human development and Behavior: The proceedings of the Meetings of the World Health Organization: Study Group on the Psychobiological Development of the Child: Geneva: 1953-1956. Four Volumes in One. (New York: International Universities Press, 1971). Vol. 1, pg. 107.

[6]Alfred McBride, "Reaction to Fowler," in T. Hennessy (ed.), Values and Moral Development (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), pp. 211-218. Pg. 214-215.

[7]D.C. Phillips & M.E. Kelly, "Hierarchical Theories of Development in Education and Psychology," Haravrd Educational Review 45 (#3, August 1975), 351-375. Pp.364-365.

[8]Jean Piaget, The Moral Judgement of the Child (New York: Free Press/Macmillan, 1965). Parenthesized numbrs in the following pages refer to pages of this book.

[9]An interesting discussion of the uses and possible interrelationships of developmental 'stage' models in various disciplines will be found in Tanner & Inhelder (cf. note 5), Volume 4, pp. 116-135.

[10]Jean Piaget, Science of Education and the Psychology of the Child (New York: Orion Press, 1970), pp. 36-37.

[11]Ibid., pp. 171-172

[12]Ibid., pg. 173.